

## Life Inside the Hive: Creating a Space for Literacy to Grow

Jane M. Saunders, [janesaunders@txstate.edu](mailto:janesaunders@txstate.edu)  
Texas State University, Texas, USA

### Abstract

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This piece describes how a 5th grade language arts teacher employed technology to create and sustain a metaphorical, virtual, and physical figured world in her class by means of a web site called “The Hive Society.” This world positioned students as intellectuals and scholars, and explored how Ms. Smith integrated 21st Century technological tools into a vibrant literacy classroom. Excerpts from the web site, photographs of class and school events, and thick descriptions of teaching and learning in the Hive are included as well.

**Key words:** class web blog, technology, literacy, figured worlds

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Walking into Emily Smith's 5<sup>th</sup> grade language arts classroom on an overcast fall day, I discovered a flurry of activity meeting me at the door. Students were working in small groups to complete self-directed projects related to books they had studied in literature circles. Most of the projects were driven by technology. One group was hard at work creating an animation of the character Cato from *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) using Mixamo, a 3-D animation program. Another group was creating a Weebly web site to highlight their understandings of *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (DiCamillo, 2006). A third group was creating a web page about *Rules* (Lord, 2006). Ms. Smith intended to link these to her class web site, to make public what students were doing inside her classroom, affectionately known as "the Hive." I looked for a place to sit as students leaned against pillows on the floor with iPads on their laps, sat at large-screen Mac stations to wrestle with animation software, or mapped out web pages on notebook paper and considered images they might want to upload. A consistent murmur of problem solving was going on all over the room. As students discovered they needed an email address in order to build a new web page, they determined who among the group had an active email account and began reading directions about how to navigate the drag and drop functions of the web page builder program in front of them.

The movement and activity occurring in Ms. Smith's classroom might appear chaotic to those who value an orderly space where all students focus on a similar task. If we move beyond the surface happenings in the room, it becomes clear that authentic and natural moments of literacy, like most of us do daily without thought, engage students. Adults engage in questioning texts, building on our understandings, and looking for assistance when we find ourselves unsure; these are the very tasks students need practice honing, in the safe space of the classroom, before these tools become portable for their lives outside of schools.

Seeking ways to connect students to books, teachers look for methods that set these connections into motion. As a research community, we acknowledge the value of adopting reading strategies and practices that encourage textual understandings (Robb, 2010), the importance of incorporating technology and 21<sup>st</sup> Century tools into our daily practice (Alvermann, 2005, 2008), and the need to develop a wide repertoire of skills to decode and examine text and then critically examine and situate it in cultural contexts (Freebody & Luke, 1990). The challenges teachers face as they attempt to employ these kinds of active, participatory, and critical ways of engaging in literacy with students are multiple. As seems to be rife across the United States, in Central Texas, where this study takes place, teachers are burdened not only with benchmark assessments that interrupt the flow and routine of teaching but also with curricular documents that can limit their professional judgment and pedagogical decision-making. In my work as a literacy researcher and teacher educator, I seek out teachers who strive to teach in a manner that is culturally responsive and engaging for students while balancing the district and state requirements placed upon them.

The purpose of this piece is to demonstrate how one teacher helps her students develop notions of themselves as literacy learners, yet also prepares them to do well on state-mandated tests to meet the increasing conditions of AYP present in her school and local community. Through the use of a cleverly constructed web-site, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century tools like laptops, iPads, cameras, and

filming equipment, Ms. Smith has cultivated a world where technology and reading are seamlessly interwoven in her daily practice and where students are learning to read the world (Freire, 2005) in all its strangeness and complexity.

### **Details of the Study**

My study of Ms. Smith's practice came about through our common interest in critical literacy and in engaging with new media to help lessen the gap between students who have access to technological tools in their homes and those whose primary access is in schools. Along with her role as the sole 5<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, Ms. Smith serves as the technology coordinator at her school. Since taking on that responsibility, she has helped retire out-of-date computers and replace them with at least four computers for every Pre-K-5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. Ms. Smith also helped secure 90 COWS (computer carts on wheels) and 25 iPads for the school.

Cunningham Elementary largely serves students of color and students from economically disadvantaged homes. Of the 556 registered students at Cunningham in the 2011-2012 school year, 11.1% were African American and 56.2% were Latino; almost 5% identify as "two or more races." 75.9% of the student population qualify for free or reduced lunch. In spite of media reports that students are losing ground in state and national tests in regards to literacy, Cunningham has shown consistent progress in terms of yearly state assessments.

Because of this success and the faith that Ms. Smith's principal has in her teaching abilities, Ms. Smith has more freedom to institute innovative practices in her classroom. Among these practices is the use of a web site called "The Hive Society," that documents class activities, provides a space for student work to become public, and builds connections between students' literacy learning in the home and in the classroom. Intrigued as I was about the ways that teachers position students in the classroom and how this positioning can promote or discourage literacy learning, the following questions guided my research for this article:

- How does Ms. Smith position students in the environment of her classroom, particularly in terms of power and agency?
- In what manner are students developing as critical consumers of multiple forms of text and writing because of their experiences in Ms. Smith's classrooms?

### **The Role that Figured Worlds Play in Schools**

Most of us who have experienced formal schooling, whether in a public or private setting, have a good understanding that schools are social environments, and the lessons we take away from these spaces go beyond the curricula we engage with during the hours we spend inside a classroom's walls. In addition to learning content and experiencing extra-curricular activities, students engage with others in social environments and negotiate a variety of roles, some more productive than others, as a part of their identity development. In this sense, students learn, often without explicitly being taught, the hidden rules that govern success in social settings. Sociological research (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) addressing these kinds of identity-forming endeavors refer to the realms as "figured worlds." Figured worlds are happening all around us, and each world has a unique set of rules and obligations for members to process and adopt in order to flourish inside its unique space.

Building on the work of Vygotsky (1978), Bakhtin (1981), and Bourdieu (1977), figured world research suggested that identity and agency are formed and altered through “socially produced, culturally constructed activities” that develop as people move in and out of different populated spaces (Holland, et al., 1998, pg. 41). Additionally, figured worlds are “formed and re-formed in relation to the everyday activities and events that ordain happenings within [them]” (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 53). In summary, figured worlds, according to Holland, et al. (1998), have four characteristics:

- historical worlds in which people are recruited for participation or into which they willingly enter;
- social realms in which the position of participants matters. We are not invited to participate in every figured world; likewise, we may deny others from participation;
- socially organized and reproduced. We recreate them by and through work with others;
- spaces where people are distributed across different fields of activity. Figured worlds are peopled by familiar social types and developed “through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organization of those worlds’ activity” (p. 41).

At the center of figured world theory is the notion that people “look at the world from the positions into which they are persistently cast” and their perspective shapes and alters their thinking over time (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 44). Figured worlds, the abstract spaces in which people co-exist, occur in all aspects of life, but are noticeably demonstrated in the physical world of schools, where work with others exists and people are positioned according to their task or an existing hierarchy. Thus, inside of a school, you will typically find principals at the top of the hierarchical order, directing the actions of teachers, staff, students, and volunteers in an effort to promote learning. However, looking closer as you move in and out of teachers’ classrooms, you will find differing constructions of hierarchies. In some classrooms, the teacher holds the greatest amount of power, directing every learning event, and orchestrating all movement of the students in the room. Other classrooms provide evidence from students who are more empowered and encouraged to serve as leaders and more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1986) to students who have less efficacy or talent.

While researchers have explored how figured worlds can enhance our understandings of classroom practice and the institutions in which they are housed, much of the work has focused on how students are negatively positioned during the school day (Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Rubin, 2007; Urrieta, 2007a). There is also evidence that schools as institutions often serve to reproduce stereotypes and inequity, resulting from how people, particularly students, are positioned within the figured worlds existing inside of schools. The work that follows seeks to demonstrate how figured worlds can positively position students for learning and help them employ the tools and artifacts necessary for success in literacy development and in schools.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I have collected a variety of qualitative data to document the literacy events unfolding in Ms. Smith's classroom and to capture enough detail to construct a vibrant portrait of her practice. Among the data are: curricular documents from the school; lesson planning documents; semi-structured interviews; observations; artifacts (such as lesson plans, class web site links, classroom materials and handouts, student work); email messages; a field observation journal; and photographs of the classroom and student work. Scholars suggest that, "single items of information contribute little to an understanding of the context of the study unless they are enriched through triangulation" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 138). In an effort to strengthen the "reliability as well as internal validity" (Merriam, 1998, p. 207) of this study, artifacts were drawn on and considered throughout the interview and observation processes. In most instances, the descriptions that follow in this piece can be linked through several points of data. For example, when discussing the author Katherine Applegate's visit to the school, I relied on notes from my journal, photographs from the day, written work from students, and descriptions added to the Hive Society web page. Data collection began in the spring of 2012 and continues today.

Data were analyzed employing two separate processes. My initial analysis looked for particular themes so that I could organize the activities I was seeing in Ms. Smith's classroom in an orderly manner. I made a table of the "types" of activities I was seeing and documented their frequency (for example, incidents when students were reading and responding on paper, using online sources to deepen understanding, or employing technology to extend literacy learning). I later shifted and organized data to support the theoretical framing of "figured worlds," as evidence of the special world of the Hive Society surfaced during my time in the classroom. I was particularly interested in how Ms. Smith's pedagogical practice positioned students as scholars and the way the figured world of her classroom ensured participation and growth among her students. It is through this second layer of analysis that I developed the descriptions that follow below.

### **Results**

This article focuses on three aspects of Ms. Smith's pedagogical practice that seemed to create the conditions for literacy learning and the development of agency among her students. The first section provides details about how Ms. Smith cultivated a figured world with her students that extended beyond her classroom. I then discuss how that figured world served to position students as scholars and intellectuals both inside the classroom and in the larger school. Finally, I detail how the Hive Society encouraged a deep engagement with authentic literacy practices – practices that students will carry with them as they move on to middle and high school.

### **Creating a Space for Literacy Learning**

Ms. Smith was relatively new to the teaching profession, having started working at Cunningham Elementary in the spring of 2008. Like many educators of her generation, Ms. Smith was a digital native, defined by Prensky (2001) as "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (p. 1). While this turn of phrase has been contested in recent years (Jones, 2010), Ms. Smith actively and comfortably navigated between Facebook,

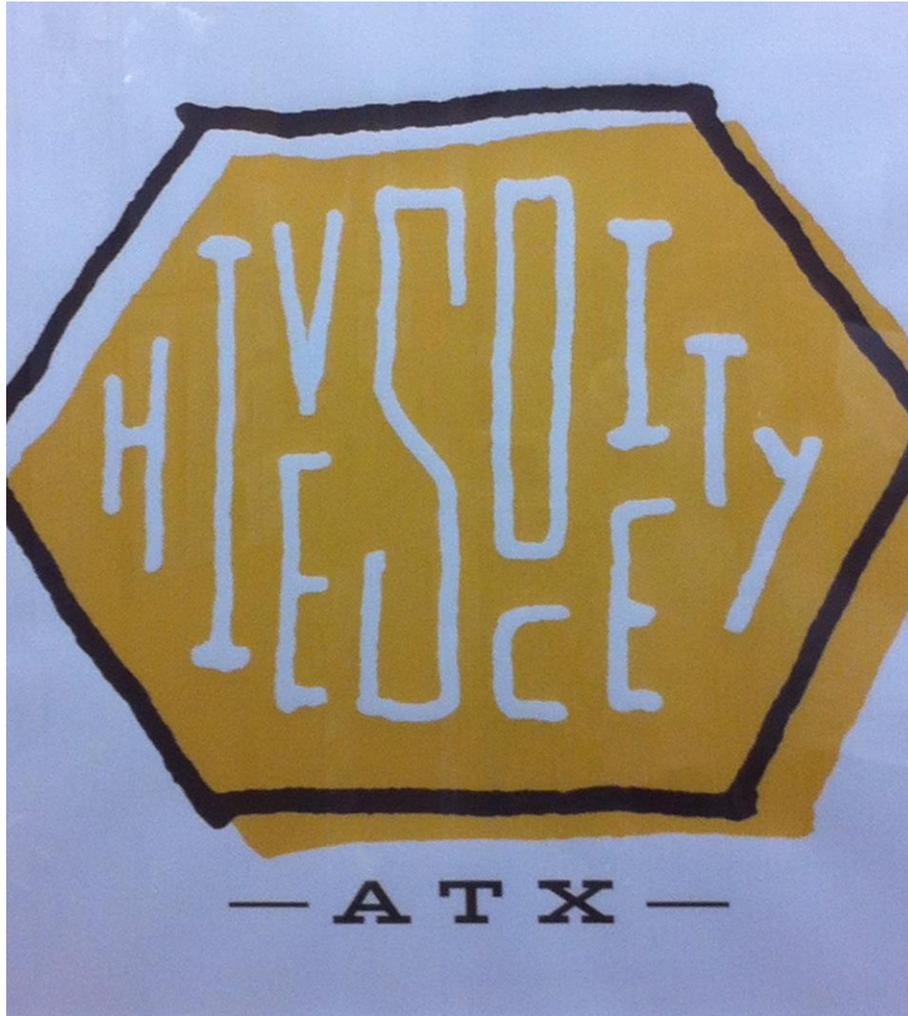
Instagram, and countless computer programs as she moved through the day. She used a web-based software program called “Class Dojo” to offer positive reinforcement to students and support her classroom management procedures. Ms. Smith envisioned technology not as something to be brought out on special occasions, but rather as an additional tool to enhance her pedagogical practice. On any given day, you would see students reading from both iPads and paperback books in the classroom, conducting research online, and writing on notebook paper or on class computers to complete their assignments.

A couple of years ago, Ms. Smith decided to build a web site that she and the students could actively use in and out of school. The impetus for this was her sense that many of her fifth grade students “don’t feel like they belong to something,” and this was impeding their intellectual and social growth. She told me, “I’ve always had web sites. I had a wiki page for my previous years...and then I found Weebly.” Seeking a theme that could capture the activity of the classroom, Ms. Smith thought of the movie *Dead Poet’s Society* and liked the notion of a society of learners. She envisioned “this buzzing, moving, constantly collaborating” space and called it “The Hive Society.” After contacting a friend experienced in graphic design to help develop a logo and “brand” the idea on the web site, The Hive was born. [To access The Hive, which is a public web site, go to: <http://hivesociety.weebly.com/index.html>].

The Hive has several subpages that speak to the kind of work taking place in Ms. Smith’s classroom. There is an opening page introducing the Hive, a page called “the buzz” serving as a running account of what happens in class, and links to readings and assignments for students to access in and out of the class. “The scholars” page highlights student work and pictures from the classroom. There is also a separate page for literature circles, and a page called “The connection” that offers students a way to get in touch with Ms. Smith, either through email or through her teacher-friendly Facebook page. Throughout the website, there are photographs of students reading and writing, highlighting the daily bustle of The Hive. When special events happen in the classroom or school community, like when Veterans visited the school, or after students participated in the “Empty Bowl Project” ( a charitable event that happens each year to raise funds for a local food bank), information about the events as well as photographs are uploaded to the Hive. Ms. Smith also highlights student projects, like an effort to ban bullying at the school, on the Hive web site. The notion that students can develop their identities as important contributors to the class and community is at the heart of why Ms. Smith keeps the Hive web page updated constantly. She wants to help students develop power and agency and sees the Hive as a necessary vehicle for broadcasting their efforts and reinforcing their confidence in leadership and educational pursuits.

In talking with Ms. Smith about how she conceived of her work as a literacy educator, I told her I see the Hive as a multi-dimensional space. It is a metaphorical space in the sense that her room is abuzz in activity, with a common purpose to tap into new literacies and strengthen skills in language arts. The web site is a virtual space that students can visit that additionally makes their work public. What was intriguing to me though, was how the Hive was also a physical space, evident throughout the classroom. Images of the Hive Society logo were on the walls of the room and drawn onto stools students sat upon when working in small groups.

Figure 1: Hive Logo



When Ms. Smith or a student got a phone call in class, they answered the phone, “The Hive Society, this is...” Because of these multiple entry points and reinforcements of a collaborative community, the students really did seem to work in tandem with one another. I was not the only one who noticed. Since my time in the field, district and national educators interested in social and emotional learning (like representatives of CASEL, the Collaborative for the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) visited Ms. Smith often. Her school district selected her as a demonstration teacher to help others innovate and integrate technology in their classroom practice. Last spring she participated in a local TED talk in-service, centered on issues of education. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ms. Smith’s students consistently did well on state-mandated tests and local benchmarks, so it seemed the Hive was a good place for students to grow and learn. What followed next was the manner in which Ms. Smith helped develop her students’ identities as thinkers and scholars inside the Hive.

### Helping Students Develop a Scholarly Identity

Figured worlds research (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2005; Holland, et al., 1998; Rubin, 2007) suggests that in order to gain power within a particular world we must learn to use the tools and understand the artifacts of that space. Our capacity to act with agency inside a figured world is also connected to how we position ourselves or how we are positioned within that world. The first time I visited Ms. Smith's classroom in the spring of 2012, she was reading from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and asking students about their impressions of the language Cisneros used to shape the story. One student acknowledged, "She uses a lot of figurative language" and proceeded to point out evidence of its use from the passage. Another noted, "I can tell that she's poor." Ms. Smith asked, "What textual evidence do you have that tells you the speaker is poor?" Students responded almost in unison, "She's moved in and out of a lot of houses!" Critical thinking skills are constantly in play in Ms. Smith's classroom, and she emboldens students by reminding them that they are all deep thinkers, capable of solving complex problems and completing difficult tasks.

Inspired by a line from John Irving's book *The Cider House Rules*, Ms. Smith said to her students each day, "Good morning you princes of thought, you queens of imagination." She also posted this greeting to a wall in her room, to reinforce the importance of thinking and imagining. In the hands of another teacher, this salutation might seem overdone or strained. In Ms. Smith's class, the students always responded, "Good morning, Ms. Smith!" and this seemed to set a positive tone for the work ahead in addition to reminding students they were in a learning space. While most teachers would type "Student Name," Ms. Smith expected her students to work as scholars, evidenced by her addressing her students as "Scholar" in person, on the Hive website, and handouts she created.

One hallmark of Ms. Smith's practice was her continuous attempt to test out new ways of promoting literacy and scholarship among her students. In the fall of 2012, she began uploading articles from *Time for Kids*, the *New York Times*, and other online print material to the "Buzz" section of the Hive Society web site for students to access during in-class reading assignments. Notes from my observation journal detail one such event:

Today the students are reading a short piece "An Attack in Pakistan: A teenage girl is harmed for speaking up about the right to go to school" (from Time, October 10, 2012). Emil has them respond to this reading by going to Survey Monkey to answer some questions over the reading. All of this information is posted to the Hive. It seems like every day she tries a new way to incorporate typing, computer skills, and online practice with the students. She tells me, "A lot of the students need to work on their typing skills and this gives them the chance. We used to just have my computer in the class, and I couldn't do this kind of work. Now that we have more computers and the iPads, students can get online and do their work this way – it saves paper too." (J. Saunders, observation journal, November 8, 2012)

While Ms. Smith placed the assignment and directions online, she also offered students a handout to use to take “thinking notes” while reading. Rather than giving students multiple-choice questions through Survey Monkey, Ms. Smith asked them to work in pairs to answer a series of open-ended questions that she could download and read later. Some of the questions included in the survey were: How was this article organized? What emotions do the various photographic features make the reader feel? What does cowardice mean? What does courage mean? Why do you think the author choose to use these words as a subtitle? In the future, what do you think the people of Pakistan will do? What type of person is Malala? Please use textual evidence to back up your answer.

Even the introduction to the assignment posted to the “Buzz” portion of the Hive web site positioned students as thinkers and reminded them how fortunate they were to be given the opportunity to learn:

Here we are...sitting in school...which is more than many children in Pakistan are even allowed to do. We think, and play, and converse, and imagine. Today we're going to read an article about a little girl in Pakistan who spoke up about her right to learn, and, in turn, was attacked for speaking up. The article and the digital survey that will track your answers are below. You are now FREE to learn!  
(<http://hivesociety.weebly.com/1/post/2012/11/an-attack-in-pakistan.html>)

In spite of her planning, students in Ms. Smith's second block class soon discovered that Survey Monkey locked them out of the site because they were using the same computers, laptops, and iPads as the first block. Although it took Ms. Smith and a student a few minutes to come up with a solution to the problem, after Googling for a fix, she discovered a way to change the Survey Monkey settings to allow one computer to let multiple users access and take the survey. The Hive helped support students' relationship to reading and to each other inside the space, as well as create this shared identity of knowledge seeker and scholar

### **Deepening Students' Relationship to Reading and Writing**

One of my favorite visits to Ms. Smith's classroom was a day when Newbery Award-winning author Katherine Applegate came to campus. Cunningham Elementary received grant funding to bring several young adult and picture book writers to the school; signed copies of their books were distributed and students met and talked with the authors. In preparation for Applegate's visit to the school, Ms. Smith and the art teacher Mrs. Edwards conspired to welcome her all over the building. 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students created drawings of the characters from *The One and Only Ivan* that were posted on bulletin boards in the hallways.

Figure 2: Character Drawings



Ms. Smith's students created three-dimensional renderings of the characters, and they placed them on a table in her room, welcoming Applegate to the Hive.

Figure 3: Three-Dimensional Characters



Additionally, Ms. Smith and her students created a bulletin board constructed of separate painted sheets that said, “We love (heart) Ivan” —reminiscent of scenes from the story where Ivan, a gorilla that spent decades locked in a cage at a mall, made paintings for visitors out of scraps of paper.

Figure 4: Bulletin Board



When Applegate entered Ms. Smith’s classroom, the students and space caught her completely off guard. Ms. Smith had cleared out tables where students typically sat, and arranged seating on the floor and in chairs to the side of the room. Ms. Smith seated the students quietly in preparation for the visit. They greeted the author in the three languages representative of the Hive: English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Two of the students who had written greetings read these by way of introduction. Esperanza (a pseudonym, as are all student names) read,

Welcome to the Hive Society. We are very glad you could spare your time. This is not a normal classroom, it is an inspiring and imaginative [sic] hive buzzing with creativity. We have thoroughly enjoyed your book. By the way, my favorite part was when Ruby and Ivan finally got to go to the zoo.

Jose stated,

We really love reading. We read at the library, at home, and at lit circle. Lit circles are groups of kids that talk about a book. For your book, we did a giant lit circle with each class.” (J. Saunders, observation journal, October 26, 2012)

Students then talked about *The One and Only Ivan* and asked questions that they prepared days before her visit about her life as an author. By placing students in charge of the introductions and the development of thoughtful questions, Ms. Smith was again ceding power and helping students develop an identity of capacity and “smartness” (Hatt, 2007). This release of power and identity development were reinforced by Applegate’s honest response to Andres’ question, “How does it feel to be an author?” She responded,

When I come in here, I feel like a rock star. But when I’m at home, my kids say ‘I don’t want to read your book, it’s so boring!’ My theory is most writers I know are kind of weird – like to observe the world. If you’re like that you might become a writer. (J. Saunders, observation journal, October 26, 2012)

She acknowledged the hard work it takes to write, and encouraged students to continue observing and writing about the world around them. After her visit to the Hive, she went to the library for a longer presentation to all of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students from the school, but not before professing, “I’ve been to hundreds of schools, and no one has ever done anything like this!” Ms. Smith and her students were equally excited about the experience. They posted photographs from the day to the Hive web site, and were surprised in January when Applegate visited the web site and posted a comment about the students’ study of screenplay monologues from *The One and Only Ivan*. Applegate wrote:

katherine applegate →

01/22/2013 13:47

Dear Hive Society,  
 You guys absolutely rock! Oscars for everyone!  
 I still think about my wonderful visit.  
 Amazing principal, amazing teachers, and most of all, amazing students!  
 XO  
 Katherine

Reply

Visits to the “Buzz” section of the web site not only offered ample evidence of students’ hard work and commitment to their studies, but also documented the conversation that Ms. Smith had begun in the classroom and hoped to cultivate beyond the school day. As a teacher educator and former English teacher, I was in and out of classrooms most weeks watching preservice teachers learn their craft and working with students. Rarely did I find the level of concentration and sustained engagement in learning that I repeatedly experienced in Ms. Smith’s classroom. Students were excited to come to class because they were never certain what kinds of creative tasks Ms. Smith would ask them complete and their interest and enthusiasm was palpable.

### Connecting Ms. Smith's Practice to Figured Worlds

Much of the research that employed the metaphor of figured worlds to school research (Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Rubin, 2007; Urrieta, 2007b) painted a portrait of schools as spaces where students experienced limited power (if they have any), and where schools were more concerned with maintaining control than with educating youth. Like teachers across the country, teachers in our local community can feel hamstrung by the very curriculum documents created to sustain consistency across schools throughout districts across the state. Coupled with scope and sequence documents that often limit their creativity, teachers must seek new ways to promote literacy and build excitement for learning in the classroom. Because Ms. Smith had the support of a principal who believed in her, and because she had proven herself in terms of how well her students did on state-mandated assessments (as is validated in regular bench-mark and end of the year tests), these limitations were not as apparent in Ms. Smith's classroom than in others I had visited. I was able to link characteristics of figured worlds derived from the research with how they manifest in Ms. Smith's classroom. I then attempted to show how these characteristics promoted literacy learning in the Hive (see Table 1).

Table 1

*The table below documents the characteristics of figured worlds present in Ms. Smith's classroom and their relationship to literacy activities occurring in the Hive.*

<b>Characteristics of the Figured World of the Hive Society</b>	<b>Manner in Which the Characteristic Plays out in the Hive</b>	<b>How this relates to Literacy and Student Engagement</b>
People are recruited for participation or willingly enter.	Ms. Smith teaches all of the 5 <sup>th</sup> grade students at Berkeley, which creates cohesion among the students.	Students appear in photographs, comments, and in blog posts on the Hive Society web site. Their work is made public throughout the school, in hallways, and in the classroom. It is clear the students are part of a learning community.
The world is a social realm in which the positions of participants matter.	Students are positioned as scholars and critical thinkers.	Students carry their positions as scholars into learning tasks and are unafraid to participate in literature circles, create stories, scripts, and non-fiction pieces of writing. Students have a voice in the classroom and in the school.

The world is socially organized and reproduced; it is recreated by and through work with others.	Students engage with technology and innovative practices that capture their attention and promote a sustained work ethic. Students work collaboratively and independently.	Students are expected to create work that can link to the Hive Society web site and to be active participants in learning activities inside the classroom. Student work is made public on the Hive Society web site, which generates more interest in creating artifacts worthy of sharing online.
People are distributed across different fields of activity and developed by the organization of the worlds' activity.	Students are supported through scaffolding in their use of technology; those with more proficiency serve as guides for students with less expertise while they grow.	Students help each other learn, so the responsibility to improve and learn is shared by everyone in the space. Ms. Smith is not the only teacher in the room.

It is important to acknowledge that things were not perfect in the Hive. Students did not always get along with one another, and students knew Ms. Smith would stop all of the activity in the classroom to have a conversation about concerns bubbling beneath the surface. She also acknowledged that students did not always complete their tasks, and at times had to move on to keep up with the curriculum road maps provided by the district. While watching some boys create the animated character for Cato from *The Hunger Games*, I asked Ms. Smith how long students had to work on this activity in class. She told me that the boys could work on it

off and on for the next week or so. Gregory will likely do some of this work from his home and show the others when he gets back to school. I've learned that it's okay to have abandoned projects. It used to drive me crazy my first couple of years teaching. Sometimes they don't get things done – sometimes I don't get something completed all the way. I'm more focused on the process. (E. Smith, personal communication, October 18, 2012)

The process seemed to be serving students well. A benchmark test in the fall of 2012 showed that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students of Cunningham (all of whom were taught by Ms. Smith) were performing 9% higher than the district average of the same grade cohort in language arts. I have to wonder what role the Hive Society and the figured world that Ms. Smith created in her classroom played in producing such results.

As we continue to seek out examples of literacy teachers enacting innovative practices in schools, my sense is we should also seek those who view reading and writing more broadly than past generations of educators. If we hope to prepare students to not only survive, but to also thrive in a world where technology, multimedia, and virtual spaces are as ubiquitous as textbooks, pencils, and paper, we need to learn from the generation of teachers who've lived their whole lives exploring and drawing on these tools.

In the coming months, Ms. Smith and I plan to work on digital storytelling with her students. At this point, I am uncertain if these will manifest as narratives or as informational 90-minute TED talks, which Ms. Smith has created with students in the past. I suspect that regardless of what she decides, student work will make its way to the Hive Society web site.

Keep checking back – there’s always something interesting going on at the Hive!

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